

CAN RELIGION BRING PEACE?

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Differences in Interpretation



Religion and Peace are two terms which may be defined and interpreted by different people, according to their religious convictions and different levels of understanding.

Scholars and philosophers have looked upon religion in various ways. Some have defined it in a very narrow and limited sense while others have given it a much broader outlook.

The Oxford Dictionary defines religion as a system of faith and worship; human recognition of a personal God entitled to obedience, and the effect of such recognition on human conduct.

Thomas Paine, an English philosopher had said: “The world is my country. Mankind are my brethren, and

to do good is my religion.” Such an attitude towards religion and the world is essential in order to bring peace and harmony to the world we live in.

H.G. Wells says: “Religion is the central part in our education that determines our mental conduct.” To the famous German philosopher, Emmanuel Kant, “Religion is the recognition of our moral principles as laws that must not be transgressed.”

Karl Marx, on the other hand, looked upon religion as “the opium of the people” – offering man in his estrangement with reality an illusory hope of happiness in a life after death which will compensate for the real evils of the present existence. To Engels, “Religion is nothing but the fantastic reflection in men’s minds of those external forces which control their early life.”

The Goal is One

Whatever may be the differences and interpretations, all religions would invariably agree that peace is an absolute necessity and religion plays a vital role in the peaceful development of the individual, the family, the society, the nation and the world.

Need for Religious Education

As the world moves deeper and deeper into an era of turmoil with more sophisticated and dangerous weapons and accompanying calamities and moral degeneration, the need for religious education today is even greater than ever before. Worries and anxieties owing to

uncertainty regarding the future give rise to greater stresses and strains on the minds of man. These can only be overcome with proper understanding of the nature of the mind – a subject far removed from the academically and materially orientated educational systems provided in schools and tertiary institutions today. Religion has always been the key to maintain peace of mind and to provide spiritual solace in times of emergencies such as during various calamities, or in times of invasion by aggressors and other disturbances.

Man needs a religion as an anchorage – as ships in a harbour. The human mind, fickle and fluttering as it is, needs some form of aid to keep it steadfast and firm in order to make resolutions in pursuit of one's ideals in life. With the acceptance of certain religious teachings, one binds one's own mind to them thereby enabling it to steer a straighter course than it would be if one is a free thinker or a lone wolf. As a ship moored in a harbour is able to weather strong winds and storms, so is a mind that is bound to religious principles, able to withstand the strong temptations and other mental disturbances of life.

Religious education therefore serves to stabilise the mind; to develop mental equipoise – avoiding all forms of extremes. It leads to the understanding of the true nature of life and death, and of the world - within and without. It is needed to provide a deeper understanding and insight into the nature of the higher values of life – its moral and ethical content –

which helps to wipe off religious fanaticism and prejudices, paving the way for religious harmony.

Who is a Religious Person?

A religious person can be recognized by his moral character – thought, word and action. One who has thoroughly purified oneself with good thoughts, good words and good deeds is the perfect religious person from the Buddhist point of view. It is difficult to regard a person as religious, if he merely goes to a place of worship and prays only for the good of himself and his family, with little regard for others. His actions are performed with narrow-minded and selfish motives.

On the other hand, there may be some people who have neither attended religious ceremonies, nor said prayers in places of worship, but nevertheless follow some religious principles by living a peaceful life, by trying to overcome their own weaknesses, and having sympathy, tolerance and understanding towards others. Such people may be considered more religious than the one in the first instance.

An ideal for any religious person is a simple and humble life through which he may be saved from being encumbered by any material objectives (and ulterior motives) and whereby he may devote his energy to his spiritual cultivation for the benefit of himself and others.

The Validity of Religion

By merely observing the outward practices in the name

of religion, it is not possible to understand the validity of a particular religion; for an uneducated and uninformed person may be practising certain meaningless traditions thinking that it is the right way. To understand the real nature of any particular religion it is necessary to study the original teachings of the founder of that religion by going to the original sources, as far as possible.

The real value of religion can be understood, in its proper perspective, from its rational and harmonious teachings which gives systematic practical instructions on how to correct oneself so as to enable one to lead a simple, humble and moral way of life – with peace and contentment, here and now.

Exhibition of mystical or miraculous powers, promises of heavenly paradise after death and superstitious practices are mere “intoxications” of religions – doping the minds of the masses with thrills, emotional excitement and blind beliefs. They do not lead to the eradication of mental impurities – except perhaps to pave the way for a greater craze for worldly powers, name, fame and sensuality.

In his public lectures, Swami Vivekananda said, “Experience is the only source of knowledge. The same methods of investigation which we apply to the sciences, and to exterior knowledge should be applied to religion. If a religion is destroyed by such investigation, it means that the religion is nothing, but a useless and unworthy collection of superstitious beliefs; the sooner it disappeared the better. Why religions should claim that

they are not bound to abide by the standpoint of reason no one knows it is better that mankind should become atheist by following reason than to blindly believe in two hundred million gods on the authority of anybody”

Whilst avoiding the extremes of blind faith and intellectual scepticism, the religious aspirant should seek the Truth with reason and wisdom.

Rational Method to Introduce a Religion

The age of occultism and mysticism is rapidly giving way to scientific knowledge and investigation.

Although primitive methods of make-belief have served the purpose of removing some of the fears and insecurities of the unknown from the minds of many primitive people in various parts of the world, the same methods can no longer be applied to the minds of modern man.

Referring to the need for a more rational outlook, the late Prime Minister of India, Shri Jawarharlal Nehru has said that one should try to avoid three main issues in introducing a religion. They are: holy scriptures, God-idea and the next world. He pointed out that if one should introduce a religion using any one of these three grounds, then people would tend to rely on it – accepting that religion without using their own reasoning power. It is advisable to allow people to seek the truth through their knowledge and experience with a free mind. This is really an ideal method to introduce a religion; for it avoids

various kinds of religious prejudices, blind faith and misunderstanding.

Nehru has also mentioned that one should not accept everything written in any holy book in the name of religion. He claimed that the main principle of his religion is that "good begets good and bad begets bad". In appreciating the rational approach of Buddhism, in his book "The Discovery of India", Nehru has written: "Buddha had the courage to point out the unsatisfactoriness of popular religion, superstition, ceremony and priest-craft. He was not interested in the metaphysical and theological outlook, miracles, revelations, and dealings with the supernatural. His appeal was to reason, logic, and experience; his emphasis was on ethics and his method was one of psychological analysis, a psychology without a soul. His whole approach comes like the breath of the fresh wind from the mountain after the stale air of metaphysical speculations."

He goes on to say that the Buddha has taught something greater than all doctrines and dogmas and his eternal message has thrilled humanity through the ages. Perhaps at no time in the past history was his message of peace more needed for suffering and distracted humanity than it is today.

Albert Einstein, in speaking of the religion of the future, says, "It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogmas and theology. Covering both the natural and the spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things, natural and

spiritual, as a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description.”

The approach taken by the Buddha stands unique in the annals of religious history. He advised his followers not to accept the Dhamma merely out of reverence, but only after investigation.

The Buddha advised many who had gone to Him to embrace His teachings not to do so hastily, but requested them to think carefully whether his teachings really appealed to them as practicable. If they were fully convinced with his method, then only would He accept them as followers.

Even after becoming His followers, He did not prevent them from supporting their previous religious teachers. This clearly indicates the extent of freedom He gave to his followers without harbouring any jealousy towards other religions. It also illustrates the harmonious attitude towards other religions.

T.H. Huxley noted that Buddhism “in its original purity knew nothing of the vows of obedience and never sought the aid of the secular arm, yet spread over a considerable moiety of the old world with marvellous rapidity and is still, with whatever base admixture of forcing superstitions, the dominant creed of a large fraction of mankind.”

According to the observations of Alexander Cunningham, an archaeologist, “Buddhists propagated their religion by the persuasive voice of the missionary, many others by the merciless edge of the sword. The

sanguinary career of others was lighted by lurid flames of burning cities, the peaceful progress of the Buddhist was illuminated by the cheerful faces of the sick in monastic hospitals, by the happy smiles of travellers reposing in rest houses by the road-side.”

To Rev. J. T. Sunderland, “Buddhism has taught peace more strongly among its followers more effectively, during all its history, than has any other great religious faith known to the world. The people were more spiritual minded, unlike the materialists of today, and placed character, service, love and peace above fame, wealth, supremacy and war, and Buddhism flourished in full bloom at that time because Buddhism is the only religion with no bloodshed or violence.”

Asoka's Examples

The fact that merits noting is that Asoka was extremely energetic in his devotion to the well-being of his people. To this end, he had wells dug for drinking water, shady trees planted, roads built, public parks and medicinal gardens set up, and hospitals for humans as well as animals established. To infuse the righteous spirit in his subjects whom he was fond of hailing as his beloved children, he had rocks and pillars inscribed throughout the kingdom with the lofty message of righteous living. Ministers and commissioners were appointed to direct and supervise moral culture. The Third Buddhist Council was also patronised by him. The missionaries whom he had despatched to lands near and far, helped

to establish cultural contacts of far reaching import in the sphere of international relations and peace.

Asoka's activities evidenced beyond doubt that he was a devout exponent of a strenuous life for wholesome deeds. 'Exertion for general welfare and prompt despatch of business' were among some of his main guiding principles. Imbued with remarkable practical sense and dynamism, Asoka displayed in his life the spirit of Buddhism at its best, working in the true spirit of '*Bahujana Hitaya, Bahujana Sukhaya*' – for the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many – an ideal which the Buddha Himself had taught to his first group of sixty saintly disciples which gave rise to the first missionary religion in the history of humanity.

Inspired by the greatness of Asoka, H.G. Wells, in his "Outline of History", declared that "amidst the tens of thousands of names of monarchs that crowd the columns of history, their majesties and graciousness and serenities and royal highnesses and the like, the name of Asoka shines, and shines almost alone, a star."

With all the inspiration from Asoka at our disposal, an attempt should be made to grow out of the darkness which is enveloping the world today.

Religion and Materialism

Much of the dark clouds – of turmoil and global problems – can be traced to the decline of religion and the rise of materialism.

The history of mankind shows how very often

nations have declined and civilisations ruined with the deterioration of religion. The historian, Edward Gibbons in “The History of the Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire” had suggested how the breakdown of religion into myriads of forms has been one of the causes contributing towards the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. As it was for Rome, so could it be for our modern civilisations.

Realising the impending dangers, it would be sensible for man today to work in co-operation to check and avoid the causes which could give rise to the decline and breakdown of religion.

Whilst religious disharmony through unhealthy competition for converts, fanaticism and “holy wars” continue to mar the prospects of peace through religion, dogmas and superstitious beliefs destroy the validity of religion in the light of ever-increasing knowledge and scientific investigations. These invariably result in the rise of materialism – bringing about greater moral decay in the human society.

Material Progress

The mad pursuits of worldly pleasures, power and possessions have led to all forms of moral degeneration, discrimination and prejudices, even to the extent of justifying the mass destruction of mankind.

Some of the so-called modern entertainments have been so enacted that they arouse the animal instincts and carnal emotions of the viewers. Under the influence of such intoxication, the viewers often lose control of their

senses and do things against their better judgement, by violating the peace and happiness of innocent people in order to satisfy their sensual indulgence. They lose their normal way of thinking, and refuse to listen to others, even though they realise that they are ruining their lives as well as the lives of others.

Man's inordinate craving for excessive sensual indulgence has created a sick and aimless society leading to immoral, unethical and evil practices which are a disgrace to human feelings and dignity.

The craze for worldly power has led nations into the armaments race. The invention of lethal weapons that could destroy the world in a matter of seconds have been carried out at the expense of universal hunger and poverty. Warfare has been regarded as an inevitable modern trend and a way of life, at the expense of millions of precious lives.

Constructive researches and projected schemes to elevate mankind have either been treated as of secondary importance or totally scrapped in place of short-term material gains.

The wisdom handed down by enlightened spiritual masters have fallen onto deaf ears. Their advice to live peacefully and to maintain a moral code of conduct that is applicable universally, have been ignored.

Nero's Fiddling When Rome was Burning

Countries where economic development has reached saturation point in the name of materialistic progress are

facing enormous problems with environmental pollution, the energy crisis, unemployment, inflation, moral degradation and all the social problems such as drug abuse, serious mental disorders, divorces, suicides, and various forms of diseases.

Despite all these tragic and insane occurrences, there are still many in the so-called developing countries in the world who are trying their best to emulate the myriad forms of economic development – aping more and more of the materialistic culture, hoping to turn their homes and countries into material paradises. Like Nero's fiddling when Rome was burning, such people have failed to learn from the mistakes made by others.

Amazing Confusions

The more people get into the rat race – for the sake of sensual pleasures, power, fame and 'glory' – the more distractions and confusions they experience, the more will they contribute towards the contradictions which the world is in today.

On the one hand, people are afraid of wars; on the other hand, they go all out to prepare for it! They talk a lot about achieving peace and yet they distribute misery! Although the world is getting more and more crowded each day, man is feeling lonelier and lonelier! The more leisure hours they have, the more restless they become! Although they are equipped with all kinds of knowledge to get safely to the moon, yet they know not how to live safely on earth! Such are the confusions and

contradictions of modern man living in this space age. Yet these problems are not entirely new to mankind.

Confusion arises as long as the taints of delusion are present in the minds of man. Along with other mental defilements, the delusion in man blinds him from the ability to see and understand the true nature of things or the ultimate realities of life.

Imbalanced Living

The imbalance between material and spiritual development is the cause of gross confusion and dilemmas faced by the modern world.

Material wealth alone cannot bring peace and happiness to man. Frustrations and disappointments await the imbalanced mind. Unable to find satisfactory ways and means to counter the frustrations of life, people resort to all kinds of drugs and intoxicants as temporary palliatives, failing which, they turn to suicide or experience mental disorders.

The ever-increasing cases of drug addiction, alcoholism, gambling and so forth are the symptoms of imbalanced living.

The inclination to lull oneself in the comforts of modern living without any thought for spiritual progress has left man lethargic and indolent. To overcome this, one needs energy, strength and perseverance which belongs to the realm of faith – which is deeply ingrained in religion.

Peace Through Religion

The rapid growth of materialism and imbalanced living has obscured the potentials of peace through religion. World religions today have developed into massive organised institutions, and the original teachings of their respective founders have hardly any influence over the followers in the quality of simplicity, restraint, truthfulness and selflessness.

To realize the real value of religion, a proper understanding of the original messages of religious founders is necessary. The simple moral and ethical values have the greatest potential for peace.

The practice of restraint of thoughts brings peace and harmony to the individual and restraint of speech and bodily actions gives peace to others. It is through these three channels of thought, speech and bodily actions that all evil or unwholesome actions are performed. They are the 'doors' of the world within – where conflicts begin. If this world within is well-guarded with heedfulness, the wars and conflicts without would naturally be checked.

"To know thyself" through religion is the guiding principle to peace for "the Kingdom of heaven is within." If people can follow genuine religious principles involving moral restraints and the performance of duties and obligations towards one another in society, peace and harmony would naturally follow.

The simple advice which the Buddha had given to his followers, in the *Sigalovada Sutta*, outlining the duties

and obligations between parents and children, teachers and pupils, husbands and wives, friends and friends, employers and employees, and religious teachers and disciples; covers the whole domestic and social duty of the layman. Commenting on this Sutta, Mrs. Rhys Davids says: "The Buddha's doctrine of love and goodwill between man and man is here set forth in domestic and social ethics with more comprehensive detail than elsewhere. And truly we may say even now of this *Vinaya* or code of discipline, so fundamental are the human interests involved, so sane and wide is the wisdom that envisages them, that the utterances are as fresh and practically as binding to-day and here as they were then at Rajagaha. 'Happy would have been the village or the clan on the banks of the Ganges where the people were full of kindly spirit of fellow-feeling, the noble spirit of justice which breathes through these naive and simple sayings.' Not less happy would be the village, or the family on the banks of the Thames to-day, of which this could be said."

Instead of making religion a way of living, it has been developed into philosophical jargon and has become a subject of intellectual exercise and debates. Superstitious practices, magic and mysticism have been introduced for the glory and gain of one religious group over another. Religions are being used to justify the weaknesses of man – for the greed of gold and power.

By inviting such worldly issues into religion in order to carry on "something" in the name of religion, the

religionists of today must understand that these will only cloud and wipe off the real essence of a religion and spiritual way of life, and the real religious values will be more and more obscured to posterity.

A Silver Lining

Whether religion can still bring peace to mankind today is indeed a relevant question, especially in the light of recent developments in certain parts of the world where religion has literally been taken into the battlefield.

Materialism, hypocrisy and fanaticism masquerading under the guise of religion have been amongst the greatest catastrophies in the history of mankind. To repeat the errors and tragedies of the past, at a time when great world conferences on religion and peace are being held and declarations made for universal peace, universal brotherhood and religious harmony, would be a great hypocrisy and disgrace to the human society.

To support such unscrupulous acts in the name of religion is against human decency and dignity. It is not right to fight in battlefields for the sake of peace, for peace is the ability to conquer oneself without inflicting defeat on others. It is fully realised as the point of selflessness. Although certain religionists have chosen, for the greed of gold and worldly power, to engage themselves in religious wars, this does not represent the entire realm of religion. It is therefore left to the thinking and peace-loving peoples of today to judge whether the attitudes of such war-mongers are justifiable in the name

of religion, and whether war and bloodshed should be entirely separated from religion.

If people are genuinely interested to seek and work for the peace and happiness for themselves as well as others, it is still not too late – for every cloud has a silver lining. Religious principles and teachings which are worthy of human cultivation and capable of being experienced and realised by oneself still exist.

“Open to all is the Gateway to
Complete deliverance”

“One may conquer in battle
a thousand times a thousand men,
Yet he is the best of conquerors
who conquers himself.”

Buddha – Dh. 103

